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Levis Browne

THE FINAL STANZA

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A HITHERTO

UNPUBLISHED CHAPTER OF

"THAT MAN HEINE"

BY

LEWIS BROWNE



SAN FRANCISCO

THE BOOK CLUB OF CALIFORNIA

1929

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19

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TO MY FRIENDS
THE FURMANS AND THE ARNOLDS

FORWORD

IT is now almost ten years since first I thought to write a biography of Heine; and already then I decided just what kind of biography it was to be. For already then I knew my predilections—or, if the truer word be demanded, my limitations—as an author. I knew, for instance, that I had no taste for the sour relish which is called Literary Criticism. I could see no high adventure in nosing about to discover whence a phrase or line was lifted; I could take no delight in playing Paul Pry on genius. So, obviously, the projected work gave no threat of being a “critical study.”

Nor, for a like reason, did it show chance of becoming an uncolored chronicle. Ten years ago I was still a student, and my digestion then was even more hostile than it is now to bare data. My professors—with just two magnificent exceptions—were utter paupers in imagination, and, as a consequence, quite the only food they had to offer was unsalted and unleavened “scholarship.” Nor did my protracted attempt at hunger-strike avail me much.

During six harrowing years I was forcibly fed on names and dates and irregular verb-forms, until such "scholarly" stubble became as noxious bane to me. Therefore when I dreamed of doing my book on Heine, I dreamed of accomplishing no vast feat of research. I had no ambition to drag anew the stream of history in the hope that I might find what a thousand others had missed. It seemed to me after a glance at the literature that there was quite enough factual information available concerning Heine. What I wanted to do was not to add to the store, but to sift and interpret what was already at hand.

My mind was set on this task because it seemed to me that no adequate interpretation had yet been made of the material. Scores of biographical works had been written on Heine, but most of them seemed altogether concerned with the how of his life, not with the why. They told most eruditely just what he did, and when, and how; and they condemned with mighty vehemence, or apologized with insulting care. But none sought to explain. And this, to explain the grotesque inconsistency in all of Heine's conduct, seemed to me the task at once most attractive and important. That it was a task altogether impossible of accomplishment, did not deter me greatly. On the

contrary, this excited me all the more. And when, some seven years later, I did at last write the book, that desire to reveal the causes, to tell the why, was still uppermost in my mind.

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The chapter printed in this little volume was written originally as a prologue to that book. I imagined it would be a rather neat and novel turn to begin the story of a man's life with an account of his burial. But later—indeed, after "That Man Heine" was already in galleys—I learnt from my friend, Mr. Carl Van Doren, that the turn was quite hackneyed. It had been employed, he informed me, in at least two biographies published during the previous season. So there was nothing left for me but to omit the chapter altogether. I could not let it remain at the beginning of the book, and thus lay myself open to the charge of imitation. Nor could I very well transpose it to the end of the book, where it belonged chronologically, for there it came as an anti-climax after the insuperably tragic death-scene. So, after much pondering and debate, I finally did omit it.

I need hardly add how delighted I am that now after all the fragment is to be published. Brief as it is, it contains all that I and my research collaborator, Miss Elsa

Weihl, were able to discover concerning the last of the mortality of Heinrich Heine; and on that score if on no other I can plead forgiveness for thrusting it on a world already too full of fragments.

LEWIS BROWNE

Santa Monica
February 13, 1929

THE FINAL STANZA



THE FINAL STANZA

HEY buried him in Paris on the morning of the twentieth of February, in the year 1856. A sullen sky, heavy with impending hail, hung gloomily over the city; chill morning winds, wet and dispiriting, swept evilly through the streets. It was cold, raw cold, and from the windows of the little apartment the bleak elms on the Champs Elysées could be seen shuddering frostily. There were but few mourners gathered in the house of death, perhaps not even a hundred persons in all. Neither brother of the dead man was present, nor his aged mother, nor his sister whom he had loved so dearly. Not even his widow, that vain, spoiled, empty-headed grisette for whose extravagance he had slaved and stinted all the last years of his life—not even she was there. She had run away the morning the poet gave his last gasp; had run away—so Karl Marx later reported—with her paramour. Only one relative was present, a distant cousin by marriage. The rest were friends or mere acquaintances.

But was it not fitting that he who in life had received so little love, should be shown so little in death? He had been a man of might in his day, that exiled German poet, Heinrich Heine. Princes had winced at his poniard thrusts of satire; governments had fumed at his defiant cries of scorn. That homeless, hated, hunted little Jew had laughed a generation into rebellion, had gibed a nation into revolt. That sickly, half-blind, poverty-stricken vagabond had set whole lands a-chanting, had moved the world to weep and sigh. He had given rise to a new literature and had opened a new lyric age. . . . But all that was not yet realized. Not until later, much later, was Heinrich Heine's true worth generally recognized. Not until years after his death was a Nietzsche ready to proclaim his life veritably "a European event." Only then were the critics able to recognize him as the "creator of modern German prose," the "most beloved lyric poet of all time," the "first great internationalist writer," "the greatest wit of modern times." Only then could Matthew Arnold say of him:

"The spirit of the world
Beholding the absurdity of men—
Their vaunts, their feats—let a sardonic smile
For one short moment wander o'er his lips.
That smile was Heine!"

But all this came later, much later. In the hour of death Heine remained as in the years of life: hated, disdained, or worse still, unnoticed. The newspapers both of France and Germany carried only the briefest obituaries. In England the *Times* of February 21, 1856, merely noted: "The celebrated German poet, Heinrich Heine, died last night in Paris. The three-percents closed to-day at 73fr. 65c. . . ."

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All of which was most fitting, for Heine had been far from a popular hero to his age. His spirit had been too caustic, his harried soul too rancorous and sharp. His great bent had always been for the making of enemies rather than friends; and what friends he had ever managed to make, he had rarely been able to hold. So in death as in life, only few, very few, remained loyal.

But though few, those friends were of great quality. Théophile Gautier was there, his fierce black beard unkempt, his thick-set body slouching with sadness. Miguet, the historian, was there too, and Alexandre Weill, Henri Julia, Paul De Saint Victor, and other of the renowned journalists of the day. Incredulously they had come together in the little flat on the Avenue Matignon—incredulously because Heine had fought off death so

long on his "mattress grave" that they had come to believe he *never* would be vanquished. But when their eyes fell on the huge black coffin lying in a corner of the poet's room, a deep, an ineffable sorrow whelmed over them. He was gone! Heinrich Heine, the sweetest singer, the bitterest wit of their day, was no more! . . .

In silence of sadness they stood by as the coffin was lifted and brought out of the chamber. It was a large coffin, enormously long and heavy for the spare and wasted frame that lay within. To Gautier, staring at it through welling tears, there seemed something almost mocking about its vastness. Years earlier, in the very flood-tide of his youth, Heine had begged in poetic despair that he be given a coffin vaster than Heidelberg's great tun, longer than the long bridge at Mainz, so that in it he might have room enough for his love and bitter pain. And by ironic chance the wish had been gratified. . . .

The coffin was large, however, only because no one had thought to order a smaller one. Indeed, as the obsequies progressed it became increasingly evident that almost all the arrangements had been left largely to chance. Apparently there had been no one in that final hour to plan the funeral with adequate care. At least one loyal

friend, Alexandre Dumas, did not even hear of the poet's death until the body was already being borne away to its grave. Dumas was riding in a cab along the Champs Elysées, when, recognizing certain of his friends straggling dejectedly in a little funeral procession, he halted to inquire who had died. And when he was told, he was overcome with grief. He had long loved Heine, and had well recognized his genius. Years earlier he had cried out impassionedly: "If Germany does not want Heine, we French will gladly adopt him!" And now Heine was dead. . . . For an instant Dumas stared in bewilderment, and then, precipitantly heaving his enormous bulk out of the cab, he took his place in the procession. His heavy-jowled, brown-skinned face was pallid and drawn; his large blue eyes swam with unashamed tears. For Heine was dead! . . .

No record is left of the exact course of the little procession that followed the body of the poet to its grave. Probably it followed the Champs Elysées as far as the old Garde Meuble, then turned north towards the Madeleine and Rue d'Amsterdam, and so out into the Cimetière de Montmartre. Heine himself had asked that he be buried there rather than in the noisy and ostentatious cemetery

of Père Lachaise. He had felt he belonged of right at the foot of quiet Montmartre, there in the remote and silent burial-ground of the exiled and the outlawed. Fugitive patriots from Italy, Poland, Prussia, and the Rhine-lands had been buried there; and nearby was the cemetery of the Jews. That was obviously his place—among the disinherited, the outlaws.

And there the last fragment of his mortality was laid to rest. Not on the principal avenue of the cemetery was he buried, however, but in the second row of graves off one of the by-paths. In silence the mourners let the coffin sink into the vault, not a word uttered, not a rite performed. For so the dead man had commanded. "I forbid the making of any speech at my graveside," he had declared in his will. "Although I belong to the Lutheran Confession by act of baptism, I do not desire that the ministers of that church be invited to my burial; and I forbid any other sort of priest to officiate at my funeral."

His friends obeyed. No word was spoken as they stood by the grave, but some sobbed audibly. For he was gone now, he who had been the bravest, saddest, wittiest, maddest of them all. The flame was quenched, the sword was broken: Heinrich Heine was dead. . . .

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